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SUBJECT: JORDAN'S FIRST INDEPENDENT TV STATION STILL ON HOLD

REF: 07 AMMAN 3959

Classified By: Charge Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Six months after its scheduled on air debut, and two years after its initial establishment, Jordan's first independent television station, ATV, remains off the air despite new ownership. ATV's new management predicts the station will go on air "soon," perhaps by the middle of 2008, after the station resolves lingering financial and contractual issues. Some ATV employees suspect GOJ concerns about managing the effects of an independent television station on the kingdom's political and social discourse as among the reasons for the delay. Regardless of the cause, there is some concern the delay has hurt the image of a government that has declared its commitment to allowing independent media in Jordan. END SUMMARY.

ATV'S LAUNCH DATE REMAINS UNCERTAIN

¶2. (C) ATV's new Managing Director Zaid Rashdan told us on January 24 that the station will launch "soon," and that he is hopeful Jordan's first independent television station will be on the air by the middle of 2008. Speaking in his offices at ATV's state-of-the-art studios in Amman, the former Reuters veteran told EmbOffs that lingering financial and contractual issues- not GOJ political pressure- have thus far prevented the station's launch.

¶3. (C) Rashdan, who took over his position after the station changed ownership in the fall, said that ATV's contractual obligations to Jordan Television to lease its terrestrial signal remain the principal obstacle to the station's launch. He criticized those obligations as "too expensive" and "absurd." "Why should I pay millions and millions to Jordan Television for a land signal when I can put the station up on satellite for much less?" Rashdan asked. He also pointed to a stack of contracts on his desk that he said he inherited from the station's previous ownership, and declared that many of the contracts would have to be "re-negotiated" before the station launches. In addition, the station is also considering re-branding options before it goes on the air, including changes to the station's logo. Rashdan denied that there are any other reasons for the delay in the station's going live.

¶4. (SBU) Contacts in media and political circles continue to speculate, however, about other possible reasons for the failure of ATV to start broadcasting. On August 2, ATV officials were quoted in local media as saying the GOJ's broadcast licensing authority had ordered the suspension of ATV's satellite signal. On September 24, local newspapers reported that founder and former owner Mohammed Alayyan had sold his entire share in the company to an investment firm. Alayyan also told PAO at the time that the investment firm was a front for an anonymous group of Jordanian investors (reftel). He said he had agreed to the sale primarily to cut losses in his investments in ATV exceeding more than USD 4 million.

REASONS FOR DELAY REMAIN A SUBJECT OF DEBATE

15. (C) Despite gaining new ownership, the station's state of limbo has continued. Visiting the station's studios on January 24, Emboffs observed fewer staff and less activity in the building than on previous visits. Some studios remain unfinished, in nearly the same state as they had been months earlier. Moreover, two ATV staff members privately challenged some of Rashdan's assessments. They stated that while they are not certain of the exact reasons behind the delay, they believe the station's woes are not merely financial. "I think that ATV is going to change the entire state of television media in Jordan, and this makes some people in the government nervous," Programs Manager Paul Hijazin said. Hijazin surmised that GOJ officials are uncertain of the effects that an independent television station will have on other media outlets in Jordan, including television and newspapers. "So people in the government want to take it slow. Maybe some individual officials are concerned about taking responsibility for something like this, worried they might be blamed if things go wrong," he added.

16. (C) ATV reporter Nisreen Shomail agreed, and complained that the lack of transparency behind the delay in the station's launch is fueling speculation and hurting staff morale. While Rashdan told Emboffs that ATV staff are keeping busy with a range of activities including product development and marketing, Shomail declared "we aren't doing anything. It is getting really annoying. You know the truth and we know the truth - nothing is going on here." Conceding that "no one knows the real reason behind things," Shomail concluded that she believes government concerns over "how an

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independent station might act" are among the reasons for the delay.

17. (C) Embassy contacts outside ATV have also pointed to a range of reasons behind the delay, ranging from contractual disputes to bureaucratic ineptitude. Press commentators have been uniformly critical of the GOJ's handling of the situation, with some criticizing an "oppressive and lazy" bureaucracy with respect to private sector investment and freedom of the press (reftel). Massoud Derhally, a Jordanian reporter for Bloomberg News who says that he is close to ATV's previous owners, described the debate over ATV's woes as "one of those situations in which we will never know the real answer. Honestly, I don't even think the station's owners know for sure." He added that "the government is involved in every part of the media here, so of course it is involved in ATV." He supported the assertion that GOJ concerns over ATV's independent status may be part of the station's problems.

"THIS IS BAD FOR JORDAN"

18. (C) Post contacts express concern that the episode has not only hurt ATV's prospects, but has also set back efforts to promote media independence in Jordan. Senator Haifa Abu Ghazaleh told us on January 24 that ATV's failure to launch is a subject of discussion among parliamentarians as well as "many ordinary people in Amman." She said she is worried that the dispute will tarnish the government's efforts to portray itself as supportive of freedom of the press. "It is bad for the country when people put a lot of money into an independent media outlet and it fails to get government approval to start. Of course people are going to start to think that the government has something to do with it," she said. Hijazin also worried about the long-term effects of the station's failure to launch on Jordanian media. "What bothers me the most about this situation is that it makes Jordan look bad, and it makes our media look bad," he concluded.

19. (C) COMMENT: Given the differing explanations for why ATV is still not on the air -- including financial considerations, pressure from competitors, or GOJ concerns about the political and social effects of a truly independent television station -- it is difficult to ascertain the exact reason for the delay. Indeed, the lack of transparency in official explanations for the station's predicament fuel further speculation about the reasons for the delay. The case of ATV raises questions about Jordan's readiness for an independent broadcast media outlet encompassing programming beyond the entertainment sphere currently covered by private radio stations. These questions are likely to linger so long as ATV remains off the air. If the station does go on air this year, observers will be closely watching ATV's content to determine just how independent it is. END COMMENT.
Rubinstein